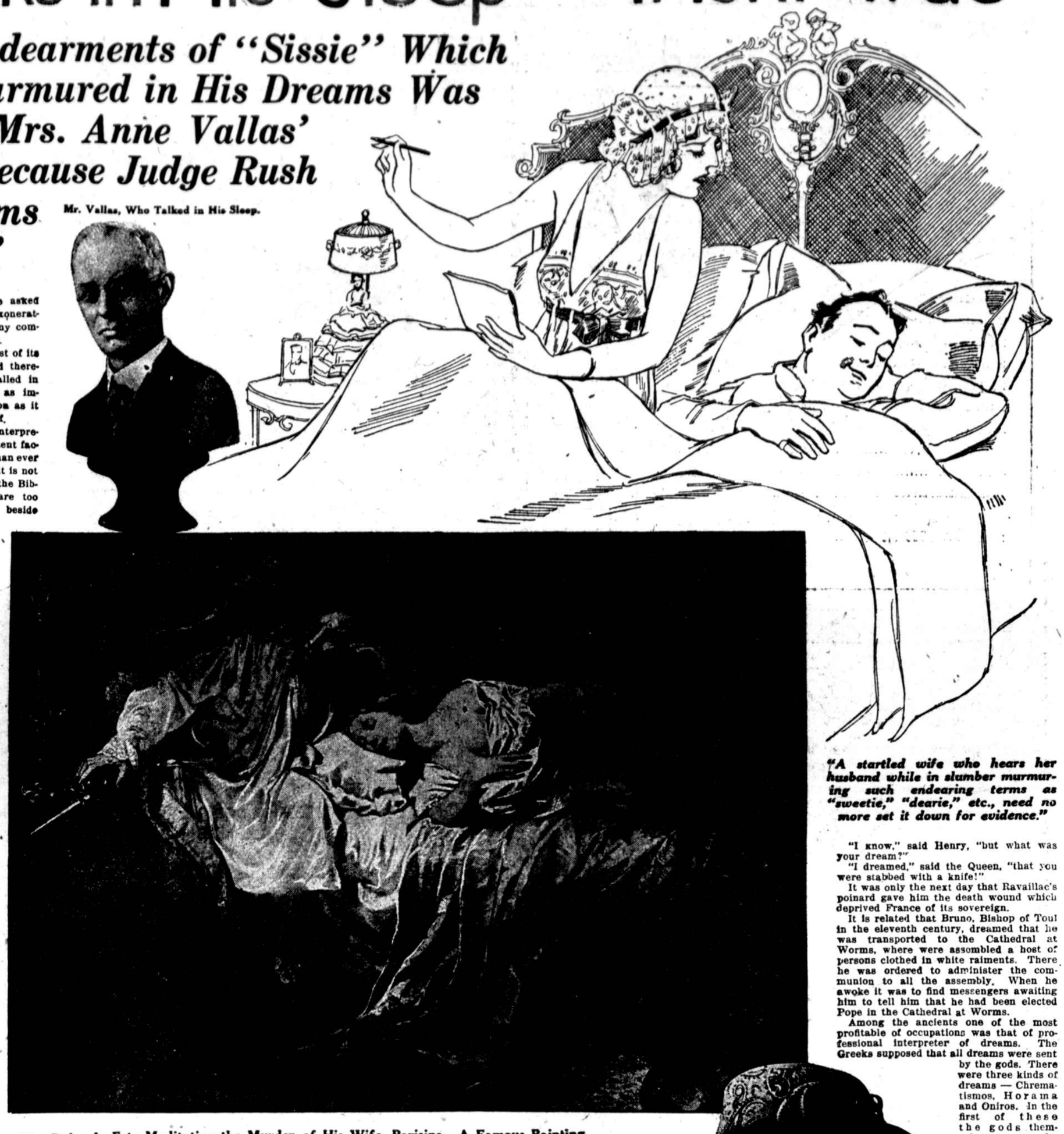
"If He Talks in His Sleep — It Isn't True"

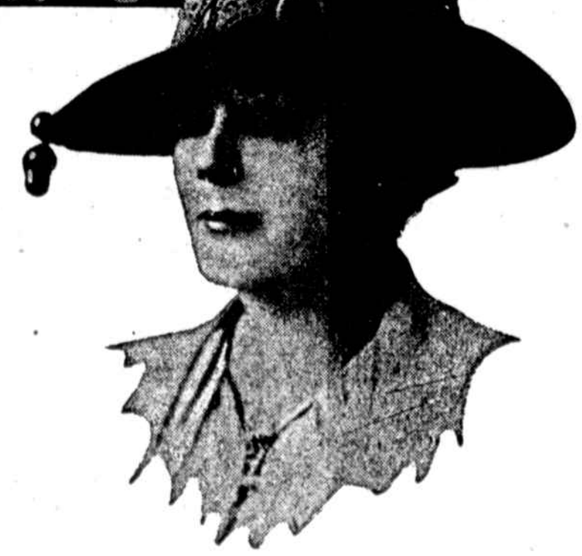
How the Sweet Endearments of "Sissie" Which Her Husband Murmured in His Dreams Was Thrown Out of Mrs. Anne Vallas' Separation Suit Because Judge Rush Ruled That "Dreams Go by Opposites"

Mr. Vallas, Who Talked in His Sleep.



The Duke de Este Meditating the Murder of His Wife, Parisina—A Famous Painting That Pictures an Historical Tragedy Caused by a Woman Talking in Her Sleep.

"A startled wife who hears her husband while in slumber murmuring such endearing terms as "sweetie," "dearie," etc., need no more set it down for evidence."



Mrs. Anne Vallas, Whose Complaint Gave Rise to the Chicago Decision.

THERE is a very old belief that "dreams go by contraries." Suspicious wives and husbands listening in the night to words murmured by sleeping mates have never been quite sure of this. And some scientists, headed by the distinguished Dr. Sigmund Freud, have comparatively recently thrown much doubt upon the matter, asserting that our dreams actually reveal our most secret, hidden desires.

Now, by a decision of Judge J. F. Rush, of Chicago, the older idea has received judicial approval. The ruling is calculated to give great aid and comfort to husbands who have the habit of talking in their sleep and to reassure jealous wives as to their loyalty. But, on the other hand, it must give much discomfort to those whose ramblings in slumber have seemed perfectly innocent and innocuous to the eavesdropper! The burden has not been shifted from the talk, but only from one to the other of two kinds of talkers.

"If he talks in his sleep—it isn't true." This, in effect, is the nugget in Judge Rush's decision, brought forth by the complaint of a wife whose husband did talk in his sleep and upon whose slumber words, largely, she brought a suit for a separation before the Chicago courts.

This being so, it follows that a startled wife who hears a husband, while in deep slumber, murmuring such endearing terms as "sweetie," "dearie" and other sugary expressions of love, all addressed to someone clearly not herself can turn right over and go off to sleep again, blissfully certain that the dreamer's heart is hers and hers alone! But, conversely, if she should hear him in sleep deliver himself of lofty, high-minded sentiments, fragmentary discourses upon the duty of a husband, rebukes to vampires and sirens and so on—then that gentleman would seem to need careful watching.

Or in the exact words of Judge Rush in delivering his ruling:

"It is the court's opinion that what a person may say while dreaming or sleeping may be absolutely the opposite of what that person may say or think in actual consciousness. Therefore, testimony concerning what a person may say while dreaming is not proper evidence and shall be ordered stricken from the court record."

The case which brought forth the decision was that of Mrs. Anna Vallas against her husband, William H. Vallas, Sr., a wealthy manufacturer of Chicago. Mrs. Vallas demanded separation and maintenance. The two had been married in England more than a quarter of a century ago. The greater part of her married life, she told the court, had been happy.

The Vallases had two sons—William and Lionel. All four seem to have had interest in the conduct of the Vallas business.

Mr. Vallas had also a comely young stenographer, a Mrs. Knecht, of whom, as the novelists say, more later.

Lionel, the mother testified, speedily turned into the business dictator of the family. William and she found themselves in matters of policy uniformly lined up against Lionel and Mr. Vallas. Quarrels arose, Mrs. Vallas and William objecting to the form of a partnership agreement drawn up by Lionel which, they thought, was unfair to them.

And right here, Mrs. Vallas testified, before even she had heard her husband say a suspicious word in his sleep, she began to have her doubts. For, she also testified, the comely young stenographer lined herself up on the side of Lionel and Mr. Vallas; and, what is more, she found out the stenographer had drawn up the offending agreement.

Looking closer, she soon had reason to believe, she said, that constant association had caused her husband to succumb to the charms of Mrs. Knecht. As evidence of the extent of his infatuation she introduced testimony to show that Mr. Vallas had once taken the young woman to a church sociable!

Mrs. Vallas demanded that her husband discharge Mrs. Knecht, but he refused, contending that she was efficient and her reputation unassailable.

Suspicion grew; then fell the blow.

"My husband talked in his sleep," said Mrs. Vallas. "He would mutter the name of 'Sis' and 'Sissie.'"

He muttered it, she thought, endearingly, coupling it with affectionate adjectives.

Mrs. Vallas had never been called "Sis" or "Sissie" in her life. Who was the dream woman of her husband's slumberous wanderings who was so called?

Ha!

She discovered!

Ha, again!

"Sis" and "Sissie" were pet names of Mrs. Knecht, the comely young stenographer!

It was this part of the wife's evidence that Judge Rush ordered stricken from the record, later denying Mrs. Vallas the separate maintenance asked for, and completely exonerating Mrs. Knecht of any complicity or wrongdoing.

The decision, the first of its kind to be made, and therefore now what is called in law a precedent, is as important for that reason as it is interesting in itself.

The dream and its interpretation have been a potent factors in the affairs of man ever since history began. It is not necessary to refer to the Biblical legends; they are too well known. But beside them are hosts of cases in which not only the fates of humble individuals but of nations have been changed by dreams.

And first, what does science say a dream really is?

In deep sleep, psychology believes, there is no dreaming at all. Not only the brain centres that control us when awake and whose activity we call consciousness are inactive, but the subconsciousness as well — except for such habitual things as the control of breathing and so on. But in the lighter stages of sleep there is what is called "intermittent mentation" — that is, a spasmodic activity of the mind. This activity is largely confined to the sub-consciousness, the vast mass of memories and great bulk of our mental machinery which has aptly been compared to the submerged portion of the floating iceberg. The consciousness is the part of the berg above the waters of life and out in the open; the sub-consciousness is the part that is hidden under the surface.

In the lighter slumber all sorts of stimuluses have the power to set this sub-consciousness into motion—just as waves or winds do the iceberg. When this happens the sub-consciousness tries to interpret, to explain to itself, as it were, what the sensations that touch it are. Then follows a very interesting chain of consequences. The mind thinks, essentially, in pictures. The earliest words were meant to call up pictures. Writing is nothing but a series of pictures. The earliest forms of writing were pictographs or actual pictures. The Chinese and Japanese ideographs are pictures conventionalized from the originals. So is our own script and lettering—although so abbreviated and simplified that it has lost, except to experts, all trace of its origin.

The sub-consciousness therefore thinks in pictures. The dream is also therefore a train of images.

But the dream once having been started it may continue on by reason of certain centres of association or memory having become active, and go right on without any further interference from the outside.

For instance, Mr. Vallas, sleeping lightly, might hear some sound. The sub-consciousness would detect in it a resemblance to the voice of his stenographer. Instantly cells of memory in his brain containing recollections of the stenographer would respond. The noise would then become Mrs. Knecht's voice, and on the sleeper's mind would be flashed a picture of her. Rapidly the sleeping brain would conjure up a series of incidents, as a rule fantastic and impossible.

And there Mr. Vallas would be dreaming.

Now no one can know what one is dreaming unless one tells afterward or talks in one's sleep. Why does one talk in his sleep?

We cannot talk except consciously; that is, unless the muscles necessary to produce the noises of speech are so directed. The sub-consciousness has to be sufficiently strong to jostle the sleeping consciousness and say to it, "Hey, wake up just enough to make these sounds for me."

Sometimes the consciousness is accommodating enough to do this. When it does we mutter words or broken phrases. Of course such words refer to what we are dreaming. And that is exactly what happened to Mr. Vallas.

Yet the dream that called forth the words was no more under his control than would have been the pictures flashed on a movie screen before him. Also another train of thought might have brought up visions of Cleopatra or Mary Queen of Scots or almost anyone. It was just unfortunate for Mr. Vallas that the sub-consciousness blundered upon a present-day woman and one associated with him.

It must be said, however, that beyond the fact that dreams are usually fantastic and impossible there is no proof that science has that they do "go by contraries." Science has never standardized them to that extent.

Indirectly, however, the new International Encyclopedia has this to say upon how much dependance can be placed upon dreams—or, rather, how little:

"The dream consciousness is not confined, of course, to sensations, perceptions and ideas. Every mental formation that is found in waking life may be represented or simulated in the dream state.

"Observations have led to the theory that the dream consciousness is composed, in reality, of a mere panorama of images, and that the complex mental formations which seems to occur in dreams are really imaginary."

After noting the curious fact that the scenes in a dream come always "in single file," because the part of the brain stimulated is strictly a local area, it continues:

"Now, this narrowness of consciousness means that we have no means of comparing the dream event with the data of our past experience; the event does not fall into relations, but stands alone. But an idea which is at once impressive and uncontradicted is, of course, accepted and believed. Hence it is that the dream, despite its absurdity when recounted in the normal environment of the waking life, provokes no scruples or hesitancies as we dream it."

As has been said, primitive belief and popular superstition have always tended to ascribe importance and meaning to dreams, although, needless to say, without the justification of a systematic gathering of facts. Of late years, however, the interpretation of dreams has been placed by the work of Sigmund Freud upon a more scientific basis. Freud was led to the study of dreams through their observed relation to certain other abnormal states, notably to hysteria.

He holds that a single method is adequate to the interpretation of dreams and to the explanation of hysteria; the method of "psychoanalysis," which consists essentially in bringing out and weighing as many as possible of the ideas associated in the subject's mind to the ideas of the dream or of the hysterical state. According to Freud, dreams represent the fulfillment of wishes. In the dreams of children the wish is undisguised and the represenation is direct. Adults, however, remain even in sleep under the pressure of a social training to repress and censor the expression of certain wishes, so that the wish can be represented in the dream only in symbolical or, so to say, allegorical form.

One famous tragedy among many that might have been averted had Judge Rush's view been held then is that of Nicholas III., Duke of Este, who had his beautiful wife executed because she talked in her sleep. The Duke was jealous, anyway; Parisina his spouse, was his second wife and much younger than he. Once he heard her murmur the name of his son by his first wife while she was slumbering. She did it most endearingly. The Duke tells in an ancient letter how he listened and was in doubt whether to stab her before she awakened. He compromised by executing both her and the unlucky son. There is no evidence beyond the dream that they deserved it, and it was very hard for the son, who had not even had the satisfaction of the dream.

Another very interesting dream is that embalmed in the epigram of Lucian, which has lived throughout the ages and runs as follows:

"Cleomenes, dreaming, saw Thrysus, the physician—
Cleomenes never woke from that fatal vision!"

An historical dream which did not go by contraries is that recorded apropos of the assassination of Henry the Fourth of France by Ravaillac on Friday, May 14, 1610. A few nights before, his Queen dreamed that all the jewels in her crown were changed into pearls and that she was told that these pearls means tears. A little later she cried out in her sleep and awoke the King. Asking her what was the matter, she answered:

"I have had a fearful dream, but I know that dreams are mere illusions."

"I know," said Henry, "but what was your dream?"

"I dreamed," said the Queen, "that you were stabbed with a knife!"

It was only the next day that Ravaillac's poinard gave him the death wound which deprived France of its sovereign.

It is related that Bruno, Bishop of Toul in the eleventh century, dreamed that he was transported to the Cathedral at Worms, where were assembled a host of persons clothed in white raiments. There he was ordered to administer the communion to all the assembly. When he awoke it was to find messengers awaiting him to tell him that he had been elected Pope in the Cathedral at Worms.

Among the ancients one of the most profitable of occupations was that of professional interpreter of dreams. The Greeks supposed that all dreams were sent by the gods. There were three kinds of dreams — Chrematismos, Horama and Oniros. In the first of these the gods themselves, or some departed spirit or some living being, came and conversed with men in their sleep. In the second the sleeper saw the event about to occur performed before his sleeping eyes. In the third he saw the type, figure or allegory of what was about to come to pass.

The Iliad relates that Agememnon dreamed that Nestor came to him and bid him give the Trojans battle and that he would win. This is an example of the first kind — a business matter; the word comes from Chrema, "a matter of business."

Of the second sort — from Horao, to see, a vision — was the dream of Alexander the Great when he saw himself murdered by Cassandar.

Oniros was the god of dreams, and in the class named after him come those of Nebuchadnezzar, Pharoah's dreams about the fat and the lean kine and so on.

Oniros had three attendants, named Morpheus, Phobetor and Phantasos. The first counterfeited in dreams human forms; the second the likeness of brutes; and the last the forms of inanimate objects.

"We are such stuff as dreams are made of," says Shakespeare; a saying which, in the light of Judge Rush's decision, throws considerable light also upon that old song of Gilbert's, running, "Things are seldom what they seem," and explains why so often we are unable to understand just why things should be as upside down as they are or seem to be.